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## STEVENSON AS A POINT OF DEPARTURE

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In the Gilbert School at Winsted, Connecticut, my third-year English class was made up as follows: First, a vocational division of fifteen pupils almost unanimous in their enjoyment of literary study; as these were to study the history of English literature in the fourth year, I gave them modern essays for supplementary reading. Second, a commercial section of thirty-three, few enjoying literary work; as these were to have no literature in the fourth year, I gave them a selected list of early essayists along with modern writings. A few boys were persistently hostile to good literature. I allowed free expression of opinion and we waged many battles. This was not a matter of discipline and not a reaction against my personality, for I had the friendship and good will of most of these boys outside of school.

In studying Stevenson's *Travels With a Donkey* and *An Inland Voyage* the class used much biographical and illustrative material about the man and his works. Without making it a requirement, I was able to induce nearly every pupil to read some other book by Stevenson. In class we selected beautiful bits of description, unusual phraseology, humor; and noted Stevenson's way of stopping to philosophize over incidents and character. This was done by way of illumination until the class came to realize these traits easily and naturally.

At the end of the study, after due notice and very careful assignment, the pupils wrote themes about real or imaginary trips, imitating Stevenson's manner. By imitation I do not mean any slavish adoption of phrases, but the use of picturesque images, interpolated humor, and an expression of their own views of life. The resulting themes were in all cases the best of the year; all were above the passing mark; C and B were common grades, and there were more As than usual. I was interested to note

that the more difficult section, which had not always enjoyed Stevenson—one boy liked *An Inland Voyage*, but was so overwhelmed at the silliness of walking about the country with a donkey that he didn't enjoy the *Travels*—this section carried out the assignment fully as well as the other group, which had always been a delight. I decided that the commercial section had absorbed a great deal, though sometimes reluctantly. It is probable also that a painstaking and enthusiastic assignment evoked a maximum of effort from the class.

Along with the study of Stevenson, as well as after it, I began to introduce modern essays, the class having access to an excellent school library. I encouraged them to browse around (nothing daunted by the fact that one girl wrote she had learned to "drowse in the library"), to become familiar with different books and authors, and to read much of what they liked best. I often read in class parts of essays to whet the appetite.

At first I caught their fancy with humorous sketches; we grew hilarious over "In the Chair." (*Atlantic Classics*; Series 1). Later, more serious writing was taken up, such as war addresses, and Bryce's "Hindrances to Good Citizenship." I was not successful with Strunsky's sketches because these pupils were too far from city life to appreciate his work. I often referred the class to current magazine sketches and essays.

Some of the most useful essays and collections are:

*Atlantic Classics* (Series 1 and 2).

Crothers, *The Gentle Reader*.

*Democracy Today* (Scott Foresman & Co.).

Hagedorn, *You Are the Hope of the World*.

Lincoln, *Letters and Addresses*.

Palmer, *Self-Cultivation in English*.

Schauffler, *The Joyful Heart*.

Tanner (ed.), *Essays and Essay-Writing*.

van Dyke, *Days Off*; *Fisherman's Luck*.

Woodbridge, *The Jonathan Papers*.

Some of the essays of Bacon, Lamb, Addison, and Steele were read. I tried to make the class more eager by telling them bits about the essays and by encouraging class discussion. I found

that the pupils' own responses to their reading stimulated other pupils much more than my own remarks.

At different times I had the pupils write answers to these questions: What have you gained from the study of Stevenson? What have you gained from your essay reading? Which essay did you like best? Why did you like it?

Below are some *uncorrected* answers, a representative selection from the group. I have purposely included the most discouraging answers.

## A

I haven't gained a thing [from Stevenson]. I do not like Stevenson's style of writing and I do not like his essays. The book I read I didn't like because there was so much dialect in it as to make it almost unintelligible.

I read Lantern Bearers and essays in Island Nights Entertainment. I didn't like them very well but I think Stevenson wrote some better essays than some of the ones just before him.

[With A I didn't win the fight.]

## B

I have learned a great deal from Stevenson's writings. He makes one feel that life is worth living. He intimates that deep reading and a good education are necessary, and his ideas and views of many subjects set me to thinking. He shows us by cheery nature that everything isn't wrong just because we may be—[unfinished].

Intensive Living [C. Comer]. I was interested in it because it was so true. It was a very serious essay telling of a woman who moved from a small cottage to a mansion, and a good deal of the author's philosophy was brought in. What I got from it was that we should consider how large a house we can humanize before buying or building it.

## C

[Concerning "Intensive Living"] The essay discussed the way people could make a home. A small house and have it homely is better than a palace and have everything seem icy and uncomfortable. . . . The style was serious and practical. I was greatly interested in the essay because it was exactly right, I think, in all the statements which are true to life.

[She keeps house, on a forlorn farm, for her drunkard father and several small brothers and sisters.]

## D

I like all of Stevenson's works except the "Inland Voyage." The Travels With a Donkey were good. It showed the resolute fighting spirit of the man undertaking a strenuous journey on foot even while fighting a terrible disease.

His essays on the South Sea are good they show the real spirit of democracy pervading Stevenson. Even on his death bed he was trying to write a book. Stevenson shows the regular bulldog tenacity of the British when odds are against them and death is near. I don't exactly know what I have gained from reading Stevenson but I have gained something.

I have read outside of class the entire book *Fisherman's Luck* and in the book *Day's Off* also by VanDyke. In *Days Off* I read "His Other Engagement" and *Days Off*. The first named was the best. I also read *Democracy Today* which is the driest bunch of reading material outside of some old fossilized ones like *Elia* or *Studies* [Bacon, I think he means] I have read. *Fisherman's Luck* is a real book and the author I think is a real man. He shows it when he writes of the "Critical Moment." But some man like Bacon or Ruskin they are worse than poison. [The ideas here are naïve; but the remarkable thing to me is that D, who was almost hopeless in mechanics, could write with so few errors].

## E

["The Saturday Night Bath"] I was interested in it because it is the way we used to do when I lived on a farm.

## F

["The Saturday Night Bath"] It tells about the way country folks have to struggle to keep clean, tells about different methods and hindrances in this task. It gives a very good idea of the difficulties that confront the country people in general.

## G

Our study of Stevenson has been very interesting and valuable to me. For the first thing I have become more closely connected with nature and I observe carefully the beauties of field, forest and brook as I have never done before.

The second thing I have gained is the style of description. Stevenson used descriptive adjectives which I have carefully studied and if ever I have an essay published I expect to use descriptive adjectives also. [Bless his heart! He wrote a travel sketch that showed sincere love of nature and splendid powers of observation. His comment is characteristic and entirely unaffected.]

## H

By reading Stevenson I have found out that telling of a trip, or relating a series of incidents need not be dry. I think I had gained a wider knowledge of descriptions and would be able to judge them better after having read the "Inland Voyage" and "Travels With a Donkey." I think I have also learned some [thing] about the clever use of good adjectives and also how to insert little bits of humor. Stevenson also points out [?] how much the use of metaphors, idioms, and similes adds to his descriptions. I think the best thing that I gained from Stevenson's readings was the knowledge that things that look the driest at first glance are usually the best when you get [through] reading them.

"Indolence"—Bryce. He says that as a whole, the American people are lazy in both public and private matters. He criticizes their lack of activity in public affairs. He thinks everyone ought to be more ready to serve the public in political matters. He writes very practically and seriously. I was very much interested in the essay. As Bryce is an Englishman he can criticize our methods from an outsider's viewpoint. I think a great deal of what he says is true. If everyone were ready to coöperate with his neighbor in bringing better methods into the United States the conditions would be much better than they are.

These answers were written hurriedly and are often crude; many of the pupils had not the mental equipment of college-preparatory students. The chief value of these comments is their suggestiveness; they mark pitfalls and advertise interesting pathways. There is no doubt, however, that Stevenson may successfully open the road to the enjoyment and the appreciation of the familiar essay.